Washington's white-tailed deer

FACTSHEET

Say "deer" to the average American, and he will probably think first of the common white-tailed deer of eastern and central North America. It is found from Canada south to Central America, and from the East Coast to the Rocky Mountians.

But in Washington the most common deer are the mule deer and its subspecies, the black-tailed deer. Here, whitetails are limited to relatively small colonies. Of some 52,000 deer harvested by hunters here each year, only 8,800 or so are whitetails.

There are many varieties, or races, of white-tailed deer. Two are found in Washington--the Northwest white-tailed deer and the Columbian white-tail. The Northwest whitetailis of primary interest to sportsmen. It ranges along the Rocky Mountains from British Columbia and western Alberta through eastern Washington, eastern Oregon, Idaho and western Montana to western Wyoming. Washington's population of 50,000 to 60,000 Northwest whitetails supplies virtually all of this state's white-tailed deer harvest.

The Columbian race, on the other hand, is protected by federal law as an endangered subspecies. It once roamed southwest Washington, northwest Oregon and the Willamette River Basin. Today it is confined to the immediate vicinity of the Columbia River in southwest Washington and northwest Oregon, and a population near Roseburg, Oregon. The Washington population comprises 250 to 300 animals, while 100 to 200 live on the Oregon side. Estimates of the Roseburg population vary, but it is probably higher than the Columbia River populations.

Our two whitetail races look much alike, but Columbian whitetails are smaller and the males have slender, more erect antlers. In summer, white-tailed deer have a reddish-brown coat with white underparts. Winter coats are paler; they may even be grayish. Winter coats are also thicker than summer coats. Albinos occur from time to time, but melanism (all-black coloration) is rare.

White-tailed deer are a lighter tan or more reddish color than mule deer and blacktails, and they have longer, wider tails that are brown or tan with a white underside. The tail is this species' trademark; a startled whitetail will flip its tail upright and run off with its "flag" flashing all the way. In contrast, the mule deer's tail is white, but narrower, with a black tip; the upper side of the blacktail's tail is black.

As in other deer species, male whitetails grow antlers. But, where the mule deer's antlers are evenly forked, the whitetail buck's rack is a single main beam on each side with smaller branches.

Biography of a whitetail

The whitetail's life history is much like that of other deer species. Fawns are born in May or June. Most people know what a fawn's spotted coat looks like, and that it is gradually replaced by the adult coat after three or four months. A fawn can stand on its own within an hour of birth. But during the first few weeks, it spends most of its time sitting quietly while the mother roams in search of food and water, returning often to nurse. Later, the fawn follows her in her wanderings.

When a fawn is frightened, it will drop to the ground and be still. The young animal's spots make it hard to see, and game biologists believe fawns have no sent; these traits help them hide from natural enemies. As they get older, deer develop a scent that helps them recognize each other. They have acute senses of smell, sight and hearing.

The fawn's diet gradually changes from milk to green plants. It is fully weaned when it is about three months old. From a weight of six or seven pounds at birth, the fawn will grow to 70 to 90 pounds at four months of age. Whitetail fawns will weigh from 110 to 120 pounds by November of the year in which they were born. Whitetails reach sexual maturity at about 18 months of age, but they may continue to grow until they are three or four years old. Yearlings may weigh from 120 to 140 pounds, and adults range from 130 pounds for a small doe to 220 pound for a large buck.

Deer, like people, vary in size, but on the average Northwest whitetails are bigger than the Columbian race. Weights also vary according to the season, since deer lose weight during the winter, when their food supply dwindles.

The breeding, or rutting season takes place in fall and early winter. Deer are polygamous. Bucks seek out the does, but they do not collect a harem as elk do. Bucks fight during the rutting season, but only to establish which male is dominate; severe injuries and death are rare.

Does are fertile for a very short time--as little as 24 hours--but they may be fertile more than once during the season. They give birth about six and a half months after mating. Yearling does may also have only one fawn. The birth rate varies between individuals and regions, and it may be affected by range condition or overpopulation.

Hormones cause bucks' antlers to start growing in the spring. Antlers are covered with velvet, which supplies blood to them as they grow. In September the velvet is shed, and the antlers harden. Bucks keep their antlers through the rutting season until late December or January, when they drop them. The size of antlers and number of points are affected by the animals nutrition and general condition. Healthier bucks show better antler growth.

Older bucks usually have more points on their antlers than younger animals, but beyond this, it is impossible to tell a buck's age from antler growth. Biologists can tell a deer's age more accurately by checking tooth replacement and wear. Deer replace their milk teeth with permanent ones by the time they are two and a half years old. After that, age can be judged by the amount of wear or by enamel deposits on the incisor teeth.

Deer form family groups made up of older does accompanied by their fawns and sometimes by the previous year's young. A family will stay together even in areas where deer gather in large numbers, such as salt licks and watering places.

Older bucks range alone or with other bucks. They are seen with does mostly during the breeding season or sometimes during the winter. A buck seen with a doe is usually her offspring from a previous year.

The whitetail's range

Northwest white-tailed deer are found mostly in Ferry, Stevens, and Pend Oreille Counties. They often mingle with mule deer during summer and fall, but in winter the two species separate. Their habitats are similar, but whitetails keep to lower elevations. Like mule deer, they migrate during the winter, but over smaller distances--less than 10 miles, depending on such conditions as terrain and snow depth. Washington's whitetails do not "yard up"--gather in large groups--as eastern whitetail races do.

Northwest whitetails eat mostly grasses and forbs in summer and spring--clover, dandelions, penstemon and erigonum; and shrubs in fall and winter--evergreens, deer brush, service berry, bitterbrush, and buckbrush. Other forage plants are willow, cedar, wild cherry, aspen, elderberry and sagebrush.

The Columbian white-tailed deer was thought extinct in Washington until the late 1930's, when a herd was found in the Cathlamet area. This race lives on low, brushy islands and tidelands, while the hills that border the Columbia River harbor black-tailed deer and Olympic elk. Columbian whitetails rarely move into areas that are more than a few hundred feet in elevation, and blacktails rarely visit river-bottom swamps.

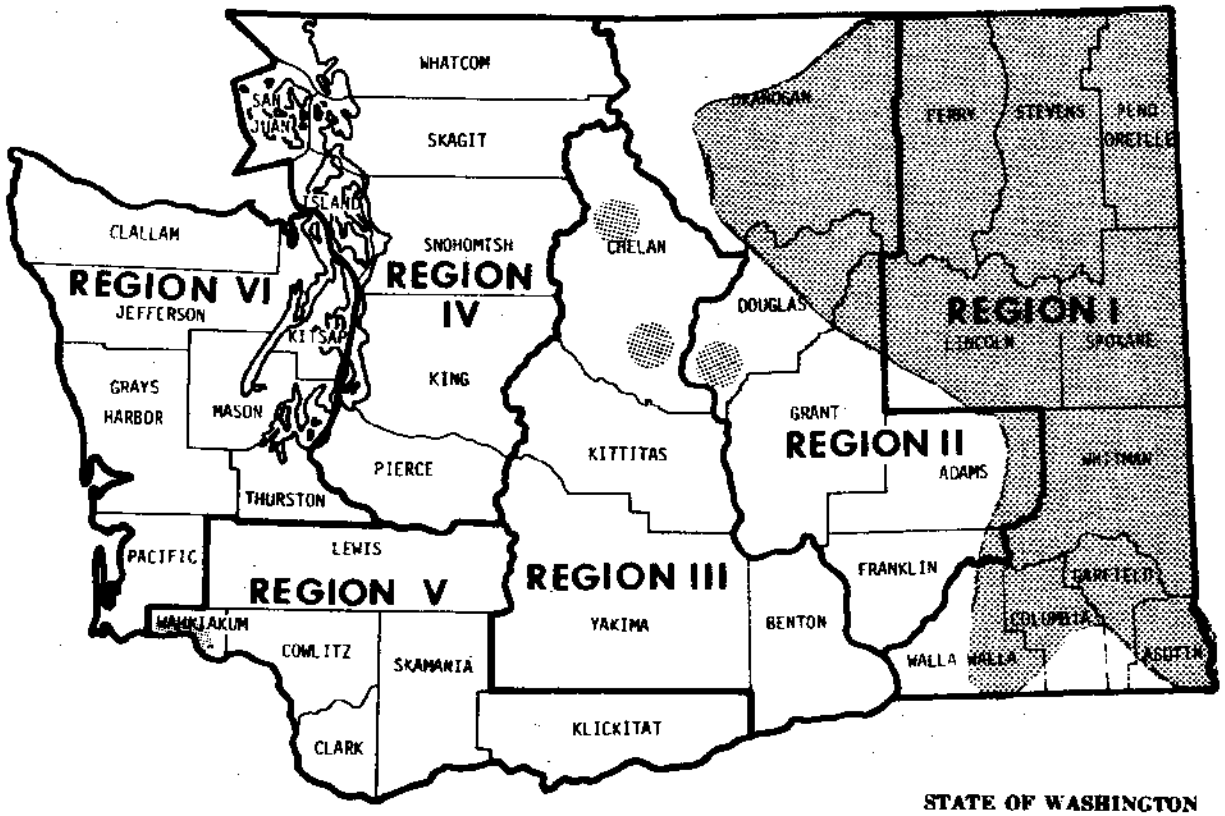
Among the trees that make up this deer's habitat are Sitka spruce, alder, poplar and willow. Important shrubs in the area include red-osier, dogwood, evergreen blackberry, snowberry, hazel and elderberry. Grasses and forbs include Reed's canary grass, slat grass, sword fern sawgrass, and bulrush; pasture areas are characterized by clover, fescue and other cultivated grasses and legumes.

Man has changes much of the Columbia white-tailed deer's original lowland habitat. Land drainage, clearing of timber and brush for pasture or crops and urban development have shrunk this deer's population to what it is today. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has set aside 5,230 acres of deer habitat--over 3,000 acres in the Cathlamet area and some 2,000 acres in Oregon--as a preserve for the Columbian whitetail and has started work on helping the species recover.

The Washington State Department of Game is responsible for managing white-tailed deer. Federal law forbids the hunting of Columbian whitetails, but Northwest whitetail populations are large enough to easily support a yearly harvest. Game department biologist keep close tabs on deer populations and set hunting seasons within the carrying capacity of their habitat.

A habitat's carrying capacity is the number of animals it can support. Although deer usually find ample food in the summer and fall, forage is often scarce in winter and early spring. These critical seasons limit carrying capacity, since severe winters cause large numbers of deer to die of starvation. Deer populations usually exceed their habitat's carrying capacity during spring and fall, when food is abundant. Knowing the land will not support these numbers through the winter, game managers set hunting seasons designed to harvest surplus deer. The remaining deer have a better chance to survive the winter without widespread starvation.

This kind of management maintains a healthy deer population year after year and provides good quality outdoor recreation for Washington sportsmen and for those who enjoy watching and photographing deer.



Odocoileus virginianus ochrouris (N.W. Whitetail)

O.V. leucurus (Columbian Whitetail)

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